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AUTHOR Dodson, Charles Brooks
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ABSTRACT

A "special themes in literature" course about illness and disability was designed to help future nurses to understand the human, rather than the clinical, dimensions of impairment and its effects on the sufferer as well as the sufferer's family, associates, and community. The objectives of the course were to look at such matters as attitudes of and toward the person afflicted, how both individuals and society try to cope with the situation, and the image of medical and other health professionals found in the literature. The course content consisted of four units: catastrophic illness and disability; mental illness; addiction; and intellectual impairment. Especially effective literary works included: "The Glass Menagerie," in which Laura's limp is more a symbol than a cause of her emotional problems; Doris Lund's "Eric," a first-person account of the author's teenaged son's intense struggle against leukemia; and Joanne Greenberg's "I Never Promised You a Rose Garden" and Barbara Gordon's "I'm Dancing as Fast as I Can" which deal with mental illness and valium dependency. Other effective works used were William Burroughs' "Junky" and O"Neill's "Long Day's Journey into Night" dealing with drug addiction and alcoholism, and Coleen MacCullough's "Tim" and Mary McCracken's "A Circle of Children" which center on intellectual impairment. The reading list was supplemented with several films and guest lecturers. (KEH)

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A Course in Literature about Illness and Disability

by
Charles Brooks Dodson
University of North Carolina at Wilmington

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About ten years ago a colleague of mine, who was in the School of Nursing at the University of Wisconsin - Oshkosh, suggested that we together develop a course, to be team taught by the two of us, in Literature about Illness and Disability. Its purposes would be to help future nurses to understand the human, rather than the clinical, dimensions of disease and impairment--the effects on the sufferer and the sufferer's family, associates, and community. The class would look at such matters as attitudes of and toward the person afflicted, how both individuals and society try to cope with the situation, and the image of medical and other health professionals found in the books. Such a course, we believed, would, as our original course proposal put it,

> offer students an opportunity to study situations similar to those they will encounter in their careers and will allow them to view a dimension of illness or disability in a mode of expression that has not traditionally been used in teaching factual material in their fields. Students can...thus anticipate possible experiences of their own in dealing with real-life situations in the hospital, nursing home, and health or social agency.

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We felt that the course would also be of interest to students with majors such as special education, psychology, and physical therapy, as well as, of course, English. The course was approved on a trial basis and put into the schedule for the next fall. As luck would have it, I left the university that summer, but my colleague did offer the course with the help of a hastily-drafted English Department member. It was well received, but then my colleague too left the university and, as far as I know, the course was not offered again.

A few years ago, when the nursing program at my present university was in the process of gearing up for expansion from a two- to a four-year program, I approached the Dean of the School of Nursing about instituting the course as an elective. I had hoped to team teach it with a Nursing School colleague, but the Dean said this would not be feasible. So, with her support and that of my department chairman, the course was put into the schedule under the rubric of an existing "themes in literature" course. This course number was at the sophomore level; we thought a higher number might intimidate potential students, many of whom we assumed would not be English majors (as turned out to be the case). By way of informing non-majors about the course, I sent descriptions of it to advisors in the School of Nursing and the departments of Psychology, Special Education, and Recreation. The course was offered last semester.

I organized the content into four units: catastrophic illness and disability; mental illness; addiction; and intellectual impairment. There was of course some potential

overlap in the contents of individual works, but that did not prove to be a problem. I tried to select books that had recognizable +++++literary quality along with their topical relevance. The required reading list was as follows:

We began with The Glass Menagerie; Laura's limp is hardly catastrophic and is perhaps more a symbol of than a cause of her emotional problems, but I thought the play would already be familiar to many students and so would generate plenty of discussion, thus establishing a pattern for the rest of the course.

Next we read Doris Lund's Eric, her first-person account of her teenaged son's intense struggle against leukemia and her own attempts to cope with what was happening to him and to her family.

As the first work in the unit on mental illness, we read Joanne Greenberg's I Never Promised You a Rose Garden. Based on the author's own schizophrenic youth, the novel also presents a sympathetic portrait of her psychiatrist, thus providing a strong contrast with the psychoanalysts in the next book.

Barbara Gordon's I'm Dancing as Fast as I Can, which deals with both mental illness and valium dependency, served nicely as a transition into the unit on addiction. It was especially effective for this purpose, and had several other important features as well: it did not deal with a "recreational" drug like cocaine or marijuana, her addiction was medically induced and was thus tragically typical of what can happen to many "ordinary" people, and her mental illness was basically different from that

of the young woman in I Never Promised You a Rose Garden.

Michael Gazzo's play A Hatful of Rain, about a World War II veteran who has become addicted to morphine while recovering from his wounds, was substituted at the last minute when I learned that Nelson Algren's The Man with the Golden Arm is out of print.

A final work emphasizing drug addiction was William Burroughs' Junky. His emotionless, laconic reportorial style provided us with a powerful and challenging change of pace.

We closed the addiction unit with O'Neill's Long Day's Journey into Night. (I had also planned to include Malcolm Lowry's Under the Volcano, but we were already behind schedule at that point, and the novel presented such difficulties that under the circumstances we had to settle for Long Day's Journey for our depiction of alcoholism.)

We read two books in the unit on intellectual impairment: Coleen MacCullough's Tim (which turned out to be the students' favorite book in the course), about the relationship that develops between a handsome, twenty-six-year-old retarded man and a middle-aged spinster, and A Circle of Children, Mary McCracken's first-person account of her experiences learning to teach autistic children.

I supplemented the reading list with several films at appropriate points in the semester: The Miracle Worker, Days of Wine and Roses (alcoholism), Under the Volcano, and Long Day's Journey into Night. And in lieu of team teaching I also invited colleagues from the departments of Psychology and Special Education to be guest lecturers on the clinical and technical

aspects of drug abuse, schizophrenia, and mental retardation.

Writing and other requirements in the course included frequent short, factual quizzes on the day's reading assignment; two short papers on works discussed in class; an oral report and paper on an additional book of the student's choice; and a journal/scrapbook consisting of free-write responses to the books, along with newspaper and magazine clippings, editorial cartoons, xeroxed copies of critical articles and reviews, etc., that dealt with or echoed what we were reading and discussing in class. There were no exams or research papers.

I was very pleased with the results of my first offering of the course. Student response was encouraging; one person, a registered nurse who has returned to college to get her bachelor's degree, told me that it had taken her many years of experience on the floor and in the wards to learn the kind of things we were reading and talking about in the class; none of it had been in her nursing textbooks. Another wrote me a letter after the course was over, with the rather startling news that our unit on drug addiction had helped him cope with his own (I had not known he had a drug problem).

I will make some changes the next time I teach the course. I hope to have a few more guest lectures by clinical specialists, and I'd like to add one or two more films of works we are not reading as a class. I'll probably drop A Hatful of Rain from the required reading list; I need something other than Under the Volcano for alcoholism--perhaps Charles Jackson's The Lost Weekend, which is now available in paperback; and I'd really like

to put into the first unit Dalton Trumbo's Johnny Got His Gun, the harrowing and moving story of a soldier who loses his arms, legs, sight, hearing, jaw (i. e., he can't talk or even mumble) but retains his full mental capacities, feelings, and emotions; and of his attempts to reestablish human contact and to make his caretakers realize that, despite his total sensory and motor deprivation, he is not a vegetable.

As you can tell, I am highly enthusiastic about the course, and I would appreciate any suggestions any of you here today can make about books for the reading list or teaching ideas. I will also be glad to share what I have learned with any of you who may be contemplating, or already offering, a course similar to the one I have described.